

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-07

INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SP-02 SSO-00 INR-05

INRE-00 NSC-05 NSCE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 SAM-01

IO-03 PRS-01 /042 W

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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9738

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 0340

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, IS

SUBJ: RABIN VISIT-DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION

SUMMARY: ON EVE OF WASHINGTON VISIT, RABIN REMAINS CONTROLLING FIGURE IN FORMULATION OF ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY AND UNCHALLENGED LEADER OF LABOR ALIGNMENT. HE HAS SUCCESSFULLY EXPLOITED INTERNAL DIVISIONS IN LABOR PARTY AND POLITICAL WEAKNESS OF POTENTIAL CHALLENGERS TO CONSOLIDATE HIS POSITION. HE HAS ALSO UNDERCUT LIKUD OPPOSITION BY CO-OPTING OCTOBER WAR HERO ARIK SHARON ONTO HIS STAFF. WHILE FRAGMENTED DOMESTIC SCENE IS TO RABIN'S PERSONAL ADVANTAGE, SHARP DIFFERENCES WITHIN COALITION PARTICULARLY ON PALESTINIAN ISSUE AND EVENTUAL DISPOSITION OF WEST BANK REINFORCE HIS PREFERENCE FOR DEFERRING TOUGH DECISIONS UNTIL AFTER U.S. ELECTION. DESPITE URGING OF MODERATE CAMP TO SEEK POPULAR MANDATE IN 1976 PAVING WAY FOR OVERALL SETTLEMENT INITIATIVE, RABIN SO FAR HAS SHOWN NO INTENTION OF ADVANCING ELECTION DUE AT END OF 1977. END SUMMARY.

1. IN BOTH LABOR ALIGNMENT AND GOVERNMENT, RABIN'S POSITION TODAY IS UNCHALLENGED. AFTER BRIEF DISAFFECTION OF MODERATE CAMP IN DECEMBER OVER SEBASTIA COMPROMISE AND NEW GOLAN HEIGHTS SETTLEMENTS, LABOR ALIGNMENT HAS AGAIN UNITED BEHIND RABIN IN PREPARATION FOR UNSC DEBATE AND WASHINGTON VISIT. RABIN'S
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CURRENT STRENGTH IN CABINET AS DOMINANT FIGURE ON FOREIGN POLICY

WAS WELL ILLUSTRATED BY ITS ADOPTION, VIRTUALLY WITHOUT DEBATE, OF PM'S STRATEGY FOR UNSC DEBATE.

2. WITHIN LABOR PARTY, RABIN HAS PLACED HIMSELF IN MAINSTREAM BY EMPHASIZING CONSISTENCY OF CURRENT POLICY WITH GUIDELINES LAID DOWN IN NOVEMBER 1973 LABOR ALIGNMENT PLATFORM AND HIS INITIAL JUNE 1974 KNESSET SPEECH. SINCE ASSUMING OFFICE HE HAS CONSOLIDATED HIS DOMESTIC POSITION PRIMARILY THROUGH SKILLFUL BALANCING ACT BETWEEN ALIGNMENT HAWKS AND DOVES. ALTERNATELY TOUGH AND CONCILIATORY, HE SO FAR HAS CARRIED OFF RATHER AMAZING FEAT OF CONVINCING COALITION PARTNERS REPRESENTING HIGHLY DIVERGENT POSITIONS THAT HIS OWN POLITICAL VIEWS ARE BY AND LARGE CONSONANT WITH THEIR OWN. IN PART, HE HAS ACHIEVED THIS BY NOT CLEARLY SPELLING OUT HIS LONGER-TERM OBJECTIVES-E.G., ON SETTLEMENTS-AND BY ALLOWING HIS ASSOCIATES TO DRAW THEIR OWN CONCLUSIONS.

3. RABIN'S MOST VOCAL CRITICS OF LATE HAVE BEEN IN MODERATE CAMP, BUT-AS HE RECOGNIZES-CRITICISM FROM THIS SIDE IS RELATIVELY INEFFECTUAL SINCE THE MODERATES LACK ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP. HARDLINERS IN RAFI AND NRP HAVE AT LEAST POTENTIAL OPTION OF THREATENING TO MAKE COMMON CAUSE WITH LIKUD, BUT EVEN THEY SO FAR HAVE NOT SHOWN MUCH STRENGTH IN OPPOSITION TO RABIN. CRITICAL MOMENT FOR HIS LEADERSHIP WILL COME AT SUCH TIME AS DECISION HAS TO BE MADE ON WEST BANK OR GOLAN HEIGHTS WITHDRAWALS AND, RECOGNIZING THIS, HIS NATURAL INCLINATION IS TO PUT OFF SUCH A MOMENT OF RECKONING AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.

4. RABIN ALSO HAS EXPLOITED FACT THAT LABOR PARTY PRESENTLY HAS NO ALTERNATIVE TO HIM. IN ADDITION TO NATURAL TENDENCY TO SUPPORT THE INCUMBENT, LABOR PARTY IS STILL IN A TRANSITION PHASE OF RECOVERY FROM POSTWAR TOPPLING OF ITS OLD GUARD AND IN NO CONDITION TO FACE NEW INTERNAL POWER STRUGGLE. INDEED, AT PRESENT NO ONE IS CHALLENGING RABIN'S LEADERSHIP. NEITHER OF RABIN'S TWO COLLEAGUES IN NEGOTIATING TRIO, PERES OR ALLON, HAS STRONG INDEPENDENT POLITICAL BASE. PERES, ALTHOUGH ACCORDING TO RECENT PORI POLL MORE POPULAR THAN RABIN WITH ISRAELI PUBLIC, IS STILL IDENTIFIED AS MEMBER OF RAFI RATHER THAN AS BEING ABOVE FACTIONAL FIGHT, AND APPEARS TO HAVE LOST STRENGTH WITHIN LABOR

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ALIGNMENT SINCE SINAI II. ALLON IS ALSO IN WEAK POSITION, IDENTIFIED WITH SMALL AHDUT AVODAH FACTION, HAVING FAILED TO OBTAIN MUCH SUPPORT FOR HIS "MODERATE VIEWS" AND ACCUSED RECENTLY OF FOREIGN POLICY GAFFES.

5. SIMILARLY, NEITHER EBAN'S POSSIBLE RETURN TO CABINET NOR DAYAN'S NEWSPAPER INITIATIVE CONSTITUTE THREAT TO RABIN. INDEED, FEUD BETWEEN RABIN AND EBAN HAS APPARENTLY COOLED OFF IN

RECENT MONTHS, AND IT IS BEING BRUITED ABOUT THAT HE MIGHT BE ISRAEL'S REPRESENTATIVE AT RE-CONVENED GENEVA CONFERENCE. DAYAN REMAINS IN DECLINE, REGARDED BY MANY AS RESPONSIBLE FOR FAILURES OF OCTOBER WAR DESPITE AGRANAT COMMISSION EXONERATION. WHILE RUMOR MILLS SPECULATE ABOUT DAYAN'S EVENTUAL COMEBACK AND RE-HABILITATION, BARRING GOVERNMENT MISMANAGEMENT OR POLITICAL/MILITARY CRISIS (WHICH IN ANY CASE SEEM UNLIKELY) HIS POLITICAL FUTURE STRIKES US AS BLEAK.

6. AI REGARD NEXT ELECTION SLATED IN DECEMBER 1977, MODERATES HAVE ADVOCATED EARLIER DATE TO OBTAIN POPULAR MANDATE FOR ISRAELI OVERALL SETTLEMENT INITIATIVE; RABIN HOWEVER, HAS GIVEN NO INDICATION SO FAR OF GOING ALONG WITH THIS.

7. RABIN HAS ALSO SUCCEEDED IN UNDERCUTTING OPPOSITION LIKUD BY CO-OPTING ITS MOST POPULAR PERSONALITY AND POTENTIALLY ITS MOST EFFECTIVE LEADER, OCTOBER WAR HERO ARIK SHARON, ONTO HIS STAFF AS HIS "GENERAL ADVISOR". RABIN'S DECISION TO INCLUDE SHARON IN TEAM FOR WASHINGTON DESPITE THEIR SHARP DIFFERENCES (E.G., SHARON REGARDS SINAI II AS GREAT MISTAKE, THINKS ISRAEL SHOULD HELP KNOCK OUT HUSSEIN) STRIKES US AS CLEVER MOVE ASSOCIATING SHARON WITH ANY NEGATIVE FALLOUT FROM VISIT. LIKUD CONTINUES TO FUNCTION AS STERILE OPPOSITION, APPEALING TO PUBLIC'S FEARS AND ANXIETIES, PREDICTING NEW WAR AND EROSION OF U.S./ISRAELI RELATIONS. AS FAR AS WE CAN JUDGE, HOWEVER, LIKUD HAS STILL NOT CONVINCED ISRAELI PUBLIC-WHOSE VOTING BEHAVIOR IN PAST HAS BEEN VERY STABLE-THAT IT ONE DAY COULD CONSTITUTE ALTERNATIVE. LACKLUSTRE KNESSET DEBATES AND APPARENT FATIGUE WITH NATIONAL UNITY FORMULA SUGGEST THAT LIKUD ITSELF IS KEENLY AWARE OF ITS PRESENT LIMITATIONS.

8. CONCLUSION: RABIN'S DOMESTIC POSITION THUS SEEMS SECURE AS A RESULT BOTH OF HIS OWN SKILLS AND OF DIVISIONS WITHIN RULING
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LABOR ALIGNMENT, NEGATING EARLY CHALLENGE FROM POTENTIAL RIVALS. DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS REINFORCE HIS PREFERENCE FOR THE STATUS QUO AND FOR GOING SLOWLY. WERE RABIN TO TRY TO SHIFT GEARS SHARPLY-E.G., PROPOSE A CONTROVERSIAL WITHDRAWAL ON EITHER GOLAN HEIGHTS OR WEST BANK (FOR LATTER, HE IS COMMITTED TO NEW ELECTIONS)-DOMESTIC OPPOSITION INCLUDING WITHIN RULING COALITION COULD RAPIDLY CRYSTALLIZE. RABIN PREFERS NOT TO CONFRONT SUCH CHALLENGE UNTIL 1977 AT EARLIEST.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: CHIEF OF STATE VISITS, POLITICAL SITUATION, POLITICAL PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 14 JAN 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: saccheem
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976TELAV00340
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760013-1213
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760156/aaaabybl.tel
Line Count: 163
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: saccheem
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 06 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <06 MAY 2004 by SmithRJ>; APPROVED <27 SEP 2004 by saccheem>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: RABIN VISIT-DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION SUMMARY: ON EVE OF WASHINGTON VISIT, RABIN REMAINS CONTROLLING
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, OVIP, IS, (RABIN, YITZHAK)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006